

“DIVERSE PRACTYK IN MANY SONDRY WERKES”:
NORM HINTON’S CAREER

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When I first arrived at the University of Illinois at Springfield in 1995 as the new medievalist in the English Program, many folks around campus asked me if I was the “new Norm Hinton” or if I was filling “Norm Hinton’s shoes.” It was a tall order, not just because Norm has fourteen or fifteen inches of height on me and many shoes sizes, but more importantly because the vast scope of his knowledge and interests has always been an impressive example. An avid stamp collector and collector of first edition mysteries, a life-long St. Louis Cardinals fan, a husband to wife Jo Ann, and father to five children, Norman D. Hinton is known to many of us first and foremost as a scholar. His career is testimony to the power, joy, and rigor of knowledge, and his “diverse practyk in many sondry werkes” has enriched us all over the years.

Norm’s well-known interest in western novels was perhaps fueled by his upbringing in Oklahoma, where he received Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees from the University of Tulsa. His Ph.D., in medieval literature from the University of Wisconsin in 1957, was completed with a dissertation entitled *A Study of the Medieval English Poems Relating the Destruction of Troy*. Norm was influenced strongly by the generous humanist spirit of his mentor, the well-respected Dr. Helen C. White.

Norm’s teaching career spanned over forty years, from the time of his instructorships at the University of Wisconsin and Princeton, to his ten years at St. Louis University in the English Department and honors program (he likes to say that Tom Shippey has his old job), to Sangamon State University (now the University of Illinois at Springfield), where he taught for twenty-four years from 1971 to 1995. While at St. Louis University, Norm was sponsor for Students for a Democratic Society, a left-wing student organization, and he was active in the peace movement of the late 1960s. In his teaching career, Norm taught Chaucer, Arthurian Literature, and Old English literature, sometimes in translation and sometimes in the original. His interests were wide-ranging, however, and he could turn his hand to classics

such as the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Song of Roland*, and the *Poem of My Cid*. To the lasting memory of many of his students, he taught his love of language in every course, perhaps most notably in History of the English Language. His lectures on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and any period of the development of the English language are fondly remembered on campus for the sheer depth of the knowledge he offered students. In HEL, he always asked his students to buy a textbook, but he didn't really use textbooks in class and they didn't much matter in the end—he was the real textbook in those classes.

Norm was the only medievalist at SSU, tenured in 1974, but he fit well at an institution where faculty members often taught a range of subject matter. He loved teaching popular fiction, science fiction, mysteries, and modern British literature. While at SSU, Norm was instrumental in helping develop the utility of the CERL PLATO system, one of the earliest computer networks. The PLATO system was designed for computer-based learning, and Ray Schroeder, currently Director of the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning and a faculty colleague of Norm's, notes that "Norman was an inspiration to all of us [...] He was renowned for the lessons he authored on the system, and particularly for his use of PLATO to communicate and create collaborations across institutional and political boundaries." Through PLATO, Norm provided tutorial instruction to Madam Jehan Sadat, the first lady of Egypt and wife to Anwar Sadat. Norm developed the first-known computer-assisted lessons on Chaucer and HEL, precursors to his participation in resources like the Chaucer Meta Page. Norm prophesied correctly in an article on the PLATO system in January 1976 that soon "a university class may go on in your living room whenever you want to turn to the keyboard."

Many medievalists may know Norm primarily through technology—from thousands of postings on ARTHURNET, CHAUCERNET, ANSAXNET, MEDIEV-L, HEL-L, and others since the late 1980s, years before the World Wide Web enabled the easy sharing of information. His comments in those listservs are pointed, learned, and always quotable. In debunking the myth of the "historical Arthur" (while validating the power of the Arthurian saga), Norm wrote

I understand the power of the myth, which Churchill
[t]aught so well: "It is all true, or ought to be". But there

are many appealing myths with no real persons behind them. We don't seem to need a real Hector, a real Quixote, a real Beowulf—why do we need a real Arthur so badly that we insist on him in the teeth of the evidence? (ARTHURNET, 25 January 1994)

Norm's publications, like his teaching, reflect the diversity of his interests. His articles in *American Speech* from the 1960s and 70s reflect his passion for neologisms and what the early editors of the Oxford English Dictionary called "unregistered words." The best of his titles in that realm is "'Let's Go /fə'nark/ at the Birds': A St. Louis Term." He published several articles on Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet, including his 1984 piece on "The Canterbury Tales as Compilatio," a computer analysis (using PLATO technology) of fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. Norm has also published articles on Hart Crane, on Springfield poet and SSU colleague John Knoepfle, and even on the "Insane Criminal in Crime Fiction." A founding member of the Medieval Association of the Midwest and an active contributor to the Illinois Medieval Association, both in collaboration with his compatriot, Dr. Robert Kindrick, Norm's passion is the give and take of academic discourse. One of his great joys has always been the five days at Kalamazoo, where he could see old friends, argue, and learn.

Like Chaucer's character in the Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*, Norm Hinton has consistently sought the company of pilgrims in quest of knowledge, in which he is "by aventure y-falle," and he continues to prefer the clerk's twenty books to "robes rich, or fiddle, or psalt'ry." We are all the richer for his life-long dedication to sharing his knowledge.

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